



MARY YOUNG

WORDS TONIA ZEMEK PHOTOS CHESTERTON SMITH PHOTOGRAPHY

Mother KNOWS BEST

ADOPTED AT BIRTH, IT TOOK 44 YEARS FOR MARY YOUNG TO MEET HER MAKERS. IN THE MEANTIME SHE BECAME A MIDWIFE AND HELPED EMPOWER NEW MUMS TO TAKE CONTROL OF THEIR PREGNANCIES AND BIRTHING PLANS. INCREDIBLY, MARY DID THIS WHILE BATTLING HER OWN INFERTILITY ISSUES. IN WHAT TONIA ZEMEK DESCRIBES AS HER MOST COMPELLING INTERVIEW THIS YEAR, MARY YOUNG SHARES HER JOURNEY TO MOTHERHOOD AND THE MESMERIZING REUNION THAT PROVES DREAMS REALLY DO COME TRUE.

My birthday sits neatly between Christmas and New Year’s day. I was born at precisely 1.30 in the afternoon of 30 December, 1974. Mum had just had a roast lunch. Dad was away with the army reserves and my brother was home alone with Grandma. Shortly after my delivery, Mum popped down the corridor to use a payphone to share the news with relatives. It was considered a bit of a cheeky move to be up and about so soon. I’ve heard that story 38 times but I still love it.

Just like me, Mary Young had a happy childhood and a loving mother and father. Their love did not create her but it sustained, comforted and nurtured her. “I always knew I was adopted and that I was very much loved from a young age and throughout my life,” Mary says.

Mary’s birth parents were teenage sweethearts who had been firmly directed that they could not, should not and would not raise Mary themselves. There was one concession. Mary’s Maori father, John, was allowed to attend the birth.

Mary’s mother, Lyn, was raised Catholic and she’d been sent away to a convent for the latter part of her pregnancy. After delivering her baby, Lyn was instructed to keep the birth a secret. She was left with nothing - not even a photograph. Instead, she cut a picture of a dark haired baby girl from a magazine and kept it by her side in honour of the dark haired daughter with whom she’d never share a home but always share a heart.

Raised in New Zealand, Mary studied nursing and went on to work in an Auckland hospital. Later, having done the rounds of renal and accident and emergency wards, Mary discovered obstetrics and maternity nursing. Instantly, she knew she’d found her vocation.

Mary said the magnetism wasn’t about the babies but rather the one-on-one interaction with female patients. “Everything you do in obstetrics and maternity nursing is about joy and even when there is sadness, it is still about relationships and partnerships with women,” Mary explains. “It was about the miracle of life and seeing it happen and being a part of it; that was a much stronger pull than the routines that were demanded in other areas of nursing.”

Both her professional life and her personal life proved to be the source of great fulfillment. Mary married Mike, a pilot, at 21. A few years later, aged just 24, she began teaching community nursing, obstetrics and paediatrics at Auckland University of Technology.

By 28, Mary and Mike were planning parenthood but three ectopic pregnancies and a series of miscarriages left them devastated. It must have been the cruellest of coincidences that Mary was surrounded by new life at a time when she was unable to have a baby of her own.

“That’s when I started looking for my birth mother,” Mary reveals. “I couldn’t find a reason why I was having these problems and I wanted to know if it was something hereditary.” Sadly Mary’s birth certificate had been officially vetoed, leaving her unable to trace her birth mother and the health history she so desperately needed.

It would be another eight years before Mary finally gave birth to her only child, Mikaela. During the preceding years, Mary took up nursing assignments far and wide, including a posting to Thursday Island. “I saw a lady birthing in a dinghy on the beach. I was there with a midwife and I felt powerless. I thought this is a normal physiological thing that’s happening and it’s something I really don’t know a lot about – not to mention the resident crocodile was not far away!”

She went on to train and qualify as a midwife and later helped to establish Maternity Associates, a highly successful private midwifery practice in Auckland. In the mid-2000s she relocated to the Sunshine Coast and worked as a midwife at the Nambour Selangor Private Hospital.

Recounting the roadmap of her career, Mary admits she took several detours to delve deeper into birthing practices aimed at demystifying labour. "If you think of everything we see on television and in the movies, we're told that birth is about screaming and it's horrifying and out of control."

Mary says these kinds of dramatic representations embed in the subconscious and end up turning into beliefs about birthing. Frustrated by these types of recurring misconceptions, Mary began to study what some describe as alternative modalities including hypnotherapy, neuro-linguistic programming and hypnobirthing.

"If you train yourself to relax and expect a good birthing experience, you can re-program your belief system," she explains. "Hypnobirthing uses the laws of repetition and attraction to train the mind to expect the best possible birthing experience you can have."

Parallel to her professional studies, Mary underwent some very personal development. Her interest in hypnotherapy led to a regression session that took her back to her own birth. She describes the experience as if she were inside the birthing suite watching her mother in labour.

The detail is phenomenal..... the room was pale yellow....a pregnant teenager lay on the bed....an older woman was seated...a nun covered her habit in clinical robes. A young man was brought into the room, crying. His tears mirrored those of the mother of his child, as he handed her a small black box concealing a silver cross....

After the regression therapy, Mary says she felt both surprised and exhausted. "The first thing I wanted to do was verify it. I'd seen all these things but didn't have anyone to tell me if that was what really happened."

Fast forward a couple of years and Mary was contacted by New Zealand authorities, announcing that her birth parents were indeed trying to locate her. Following Mary's birth, John and Lyn had gone on to live separate lives but after several decades apart, they had reunited and rekindled their teen romance.

Given that Mary was in Australia and her birth parents lived in New Zealand, their first exchange initially took place over the phone, until they realised they could Skype instead. "I raced to my computer but they had a slow Skype connection so I could only see them inch by inch by inch. It was the first time I'd ever seen my parents and as the picture got clearer and clearer, I could see I had my Mum's nose and my Dad's Maori features. They were strangers but the physical resemblances were so profound – it was just incredible."

When they eventually met face to face, a few months later, Mary's mother handed her a black box. Inside was the silver cross she'd visualised during her regression therapy. Finally, her visions were validated by the two lives that had created her own.

Mary's lost count of the number of new lives she herself has welcomed into the world but she estimates a figure nudging somewhere around one thousand. When I congratulate Mary on delivering so many babies, she is quick to set me straight. She prefers to credit the mothers and their birthing partners well ahead of her own contribution. "It is the mother who births her baby."

That empowered path to parenting is the foundation of Know Your Midwife – a private practice of midwives and an obstetrician who offer a program known as Circle of Care. Mary established the practice to offer women continuity of care from early pregnancy right through to around six weeks after their babies are born. Essentially, Know Your Midwife offers support to women as they shape their own birthing journeys.

So Mum, when you read this please think back on December 30, 1974 and pat yourself on the back for making those 'cheeky' calls to the rellies. Turns out mother really does know best! ○



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